

Human Life in Our Day

Introductory Statement

We honor God when we reverence human life. When human life is served, man is enriched and God is acknowledged. When human life is threatened, man is diminished and God is less manifest in our midst.

A Christian defense of life should seek to clarify in some way the relationship between the love of life and the worship of God. One cannot love life unless he worships God, at least implicitly, nor worship God unless he loves life.

The purpose of this pastoral letter of the United States bishops is precisely the doctrine and defense of life. Our present letter follows the moral principles set forth in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* issued by Vatican Council II. It presupposes the general doctrine of the Church which we explored in our pastoral letter *The Church in Our Day*. It responds to the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in this same context.

We are prompted to speak this year in defense of life for reasons of our pastoral obligation to dialogue within the believing community concerning what faith has to say in response to the threat to life in certain problems of the family and of war and peace.

We also choose to speak of life because of the needed dialogue among all men of faith. This is particularly necessary among Christians and all believers in God, and between believers and all who love life if peace is to be secured and life is to be saved. There is evidence that

many men find difficulty in reconciling their love for life with worship of the Lord of life.

On the other hand, it is becoming clear that the believer and the humanist have common concerns for both life and peace. For example, an agnostic philosopher, much listened to by contemporary students, has this to say:

"Why do not those who represent the traditions of religion and humanism speak up and say that there is no deadlier sin than love for death and contempt for life? Why not encourage our best brains—scientists,

artists, educators—to make suggestions on how to arouse and stimulate love for life as opposed to love for gadgets? . . . Maybe it is too late. Maybe the neutron bomb which leaves entire cities intact, but without life, is to be the symbol of our civilization." (Erich Fromm: *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil*)

The defense of life provides a starting point, then, for positive dialogue between Christians and humanists. Christians bring to the dialogue on the defense of life a further motivation. We are convinced that belief in God is intimately bound up

with devotion to life. God is the ultimate source of life. His Son is the Redeemer, so that denial of God undermines the sanctity of life itself.

Our pastoral letter will emphasize the maturing of life in the family and the development of life in a peaceful world order. Threats to life are most effectively confronted by an appeal to Christian conscience. We pray that our words may join us in common cause with all who reverence life and seek peace. We pray further that our efforts may help join all men in common faith before God Who "gives freely and His gift is eternal life."

Chapter One: The Christian Family

The attitude man adopts toward life helps determine the person he becomes. In the family, man and life are first united. In the family, the person becomes the confident servant of life and life becomes the servant of man. The Church must make good belief in human life and her commitment to its development by active as well as doctrinal defense of the family and by practical witness to the values of family life.

The Church thinks of herself as a family, the family of God and, so, is the more solicitous for the human family. She sees Christian marriage as a sign of the union between Christ and the Church a manifestation to history of the "genuine nature of the Church". Christian married love is "caught up into divine love and is governed and enriched by Christ's redeeming power and the saving activity of the Church."

No institution or community in human history has spoken more insistently and profoundly than the Church of the dignity of marriage.

It is in terms of Christ and of salvation history, never of sociology alone, that the Church thinks of marriage. That is the point of her positive teachings on the sanctity, the rights and the duties of the married state: it is also the point of her occasional strictures, as when Vatican Council II realistically cautions that "married love is too often profaned by excessive self-love, the worship of pleasure, and illicit practices against human generation."

The family fulfills its promise when it reinforces fidelity to life and hope in its future. The values of fidelity and hope, essential to human life and Christian love, are sometimes weakened even while men continue to think all is well. Such is often the case in our times.

Fidelity and hope are especially threatened when the family is considered largely in terms of the pleasures or conveniences it provides for the individual or in terms of its economic or political potential. Christians should be the first to promote material improvement and provide for the family structure, but they must never measure the worth of the family nor the purpose of family life by these standards alone.

For the believer, the family is the place where God's image is reproduced in His creation. The family is the community within which the person is realized, the place where all hopes for the future of the person are nourished. The family is a learning experience in which fidelity is fostered, hope imparted and life honored; it thus increases the moral resources of our culture and, more importantly, of the person.

The family is a sign to all mankind of fidelity to life and of hope in the future which become possible when persons are in communion with one another; it is a sign to believers of the depth of this fidelity and this hope when these center on God; it is a sign to Christians of the fidelity and hope which Christ communicates as the elder brother of the family of the Church for which He died.

The Family: A Force For Life

It is the unfortunate fact that in all times some men have acted against life. The forms of the threat have varied; some of these endure to this day.

Since the family is the source of life, no act against life is more hostile than one which occurs within the family. By such an act, life is cancelled out within that very community whose essential purposes include the gift of life to the world and the service of life in fidelity and hope.

For all these reasons, the Christian family is called more now than ever to a prophetic mission, a witness to the primacy of life and the

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importance of whatever preserves life. The Christian family therefore occupies a pre-eminent place in our renewed theology, particularly the theology of marriage and of the vocation of the laity. Christian families are called to comfort the world with the full reality of human love and proclaim to the world the mystery of divine love as these are revealed through the family.

The prophetic mission of the family obliges it to fidelity to conjugal love in the face of the compromises and infidelities condoned in our culture. Its prophetic mission obliges the family to valiant hope in life, contradicting whatever forces seek to prevent, destroy or impair life.

In its emphasis on the virtues of fidelity and hope, so essential to the prophetic witness of the family, Christian sexual morality derives therefore not from the inviolability of generative biology, but ultimately from the sanctity of life itself and the nobility of human sexuality.

The Christian ascetic of chastity, within and outside marriage, honors the sanctity of life and protects the dignity of human sexuality. Were there no Revelation nor religion, civilization itself would require rational discipline of the sexual instinct.

Revelation, however, inspires chastity with more sublime purposes and creative power. In chaste love, the Christian, whether his vocation be to marriage or to celibacy, expresses love for God Himself. In the case of spouses, marital chastity demands not the contradiction of sexuality but its ordered expression in openness to life and fidelity to love, which means also openness and faithfulness to God.

These considerations enter into the definition of responsible parenthood. The decision to give life to another person is the responsibility, under God, of the spouses who, in effect, ask the Creator to commit to their care the formation of a child.

The fact that the decision touches upon human life and the human person is an indication of the reverence in which it must be made; the fact that the decision involves openness to God's creative power and providential love demands that it be unselfish, free all calculation inconsistent with generosity.

Responsible parenthood, as the Church understands it, places on the properly formed conscience of spouses all the judgments, options and choices which add up to the awesome decision to give postpone or decline life. The final decision may sometimes involve medical, economic, sociological or psychological considerations.

BUT IN NO CASE CAN IT DELIBERATELY CHOOSE OBJECTIVE MORAL DISORDER. IF IT IS TO BE RESPONSIBLE, IT CANNOT BE THE RESULT OF MERE CAPRICE NOR OF SUPERFICIAL JUDGMENTS CONCERNING RELATIVE VALUES AS BETWEEN PERSONS AND THINGS, BETWEEN LIFE AND ITS CONVENIENCES.

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It is within this perspective of a

total vision of man and not merely of isolated family considerations, narrowly conceived, that Pope Paul, drawing extensively on the content of Vatican Council II, has written his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

The Encyclical And Its Content

The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* provides the theological framework within which Pope Paul works out the teaching set forth in *Humanae Vitae*:

"Therefore when there is question of harmonizing conjugal love with the responsible transmission of life, the moral aspect of any procedure does not depend solely on sincere intentions or on an evaluation of motives. It must be determined by objective standards.

"These, based on the nature of the human person and his acts, preserve the full sense of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love. Such a

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goal cannot be achieved unless the virtue of conjugal chastity is sincerely practiced.

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Everyone should be persuaded that human life and the task of transmitting it are not realities bound up with this world alone. Hence they cannot be measured or perceived only in terms of it, but always have a bearing on the eternal destiny of men" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 51).

Pope Paul speaks of conjugal love as "fully human," "a very special form of personal friendship," "faithful and exclusive until death," "a source of profound and lasting happiness." Such love, however, "is not exhausted by the communion between husband and wife, but is destined to continue, raising up new lives."

THERE IS AN "OBJECTIVE MORAL ORDER ESTABLISHED BY GOD" WHICH REQUIRES THAT "EACH AND EVERY MARRIAGE ACT MUST REMAIN OPEN TO THE TRANSMISSION OF LIFE."

Both conciliar and papal teaching, therefore, emphasize that the interrelationship between the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning of marriage is impaired, even contradicted, when acts expressive of mar-

ital union are performed without love on the one hand and without openness to life on the other.

Consistent with this, the encyclical sees the use of the periodic rhythms of nature, even though such use avoids rather than prevents conception, as morally imperfect if its motivation is primarily refusal of life rather than the human desire to share love within the spirituality of responsible parenthood.

The encyclical *Humanae Vitae* is not a negative proclamation, seeking only to prohibit artificial methods of contraception. In full awareness of population problems and family anxieties, it is a defense of life and of love, a defense which challenges the prevailing spirit of the times.

Long range judgments may well find the moral insights of the encyclical prophetic and its world-view providential. There is already evidence that some peoples in economically under-developed areas may sense this more than those conditioned by the affluence of a privileged way of life.

The encyclical is a positive statement concerning the nature of conjugal love and responsible parenthood, a statement which derives from a global vision of man, an integral view of marriage, and the first principles, at least, of a sound sexuality.

It is an obligatory statement, consistent with moral convictions rooted in the traditions of Eastern and Western Christian faith; it is an authoritative statement solemnly interpreting imperatives which are divine rather than ecclesiastical in origin.

IT PRESENTS WITHOUT AMBIGUITY, DOUBT OR HESITATION THE AUTHENTIC

nuptial relationship parallels and symbolizes the love-sharing and life-giving union between Christ and His Church. The unitive and creative values symbolized by sexual expression permeate marriage in its every aspect.

This consideration becomes more important as the years of married life go by, especially when changes in society give couples longer years of leisure together after their children begin to live on their own. This explains the importance that couples be united from the beginning of their love by common interests and shared activities which will intensify their nuptial relationship and insure its unity against disruption because of disappointment in one or another of their hopes.

No one pretends that responsible parenthood or even fidelity to the unitive love of marriage, as these are understood by the Church, is easy of attainment without prayerful dis-

"The Pastoral Constitution . . . reminds us that in their manner of acting, spouses should be aware that they cannot proceed arbitrarily. They must always be governed according to a conscience dutifully conformed to the divine law itself, and should be submissive toward the Church's teaching office . . ."

cipline. Recourse to natural rhythms, for example, presents problems which the Holy Father has asked medical science to help solve.

Chastity, as other virtues, is not mastered all at once or without sacrifice. It may involve failures and success, declines and growth, regressions in the midst of progress. A hierarchy of values that reflects a conformity to the example of Christ is neither easily achieved nor insured against loss. Moreover, Christians, however many their failures, will neither expect nor wish the Church to obscure the moral ideal in the light of which they press toward perfection.

In the pursuit of the ideal of chastity, again as of every other virtue to which he is bound, the Christian must never lose heart; least of all, can he pretend that compromise is conquest. At all times, his mind and heart will echo St. Paul: "Nor that I have become perfect yet; I have not yet won, but I am still running, trying to capture the prize for which Christ Jesus captured me" (Phil. 3,12). In no case, does he suppose that the Church, in proposing such goals, teaches erroneously and needlessly burdens its members.

They are quite right who insist that the Church must labor to heal the human condition by more than word and precept alone if it wishes its preaching to be taken seriously. All the moral teaching of the Church proposes objective standards difficult to attain: of honesty, respect for other peoples' property and lives, social justice, integrity in public office, devotion to learning, to service, to God. These standards demand of those to whom they are preached renunciations, frequently against the grain, but creative in their final effect. They also demand of those who preach these ideals that they, too, play their full part in the struggle against the social evils which obstruct their attainment.

We shall consider later in this letter some of our pastoral responsi-

bilities toward the promotion of distributive justice, the rights and stability of the family, and the consequent social climate favorable to marriage morality. In the meantime, the Church, when she fulfills her prophetic role of preaching moral ideals and social reform, must do so with all the patience that the work of teaching requires.

The existence of the Sacrament of Penance in the Church is an indication that Christian ideals are not easy to achieve nor, once achieved, ours forever. The Church cannot, however, compromise the ideal. She is bound to teach it as it is.

The Encyclical And Conscience

Developing last year the teaching of the Council on the nature of the Church, we spoke of the reciprocal claims of conscience and authority in the Christian community as Christ called it into being.

We noted that conscience "though it is inviolable is not a law unto itself"; that "the distinction between natural religion and revealed lies in this: that one has a subjective authority, and the other an objective", though both invoke conscience. We recalled that "God does not leave man to himself but has entered history through a Word which is 'the true light that enlightens all men'; that Word speaks to us and still enlightens us in the Church of Jesus Christ which carries the double burden of human conscience and divine authority."

These wider questions of conscience, its nature, witness, aberrations and claims, above all its formation, are presupposed in this encyclical as in any papal or conciliar decisions on moral teaching. We recognize the role of conscience as a "practical dictate", not a teacher of doctrine.

Thomas Aquinas describes conscience as the practical judgment or dictate of reason, by which we judge what here and now is to be done as being good, or to be avoided as evil. Vatican Council II says that a man is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience (cf. *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, 3). This is certainly true in any conflict between a practical dictate of conscience and a legislative or administrative decree of any superior.

However, when it is question of the Pope's teaching, as distinct from a decree or order, on a matter bound up with life and salvation, the question of conscience and its formation takes on quite different perspectives and dimensions.

Cardinal Newman puts it in strong terms: ". . . I have to say again, lest I should be misunderstood, that when I speak of conscience, I mean conscience truly so called. When it has the right of opposing

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